

R&B

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Recapture The Magic...

Despite the impression given by revisionist historians, Motown was neither the first nor necessarily the greatest African-American record label. It was undeniably the most successful, and no child of the '60s could ever denigrate or minimize its impact. But it casts no stone on Berry Gordy's house to suggest that Vee-Jay Records, a Chicago company started by Vivian & James Bracken with Calvin Carter in 1952, was Motown's equal in many ways, chart success excepted. Vee-Jay began as a gospel label, quickly expanded into R&B, and at one time also had a remarkable jazz roster. They even had top pop artists for a spell with the Four Seasons and the Beatles. No, they didn't rip off strings of number-one pop hits, nor get their acts on national television shows or make triumphant tours of Europe. Those things weren't in the cards for African-American labels in the '50s and early '60s (or for many black people, period). They were plagued by internal problems and fiscal misadventures almost from day one; yet they made magnificent records utilizing many principles later exploited by Gordy and his Motown bunch. These included keeping the records short (most under three minutes) and the storylines simple, the production gimmick-free and inducing from their artists a zest and enthusiasm in their singing you could not only hear, but feel. The important thing about Vee-Jay wasn't just that it was African-American owned and operated, but that it issued incredible music that resounded with joy and retained its beauty long after the company passed on to corporate heaven. If its failure to survive represents a business tragedy, its musical legacy represents a cultural miracle.

How Wyne

Gene Chandler - "Duke Of Earl"

The fabulous "duke-duke-duke" opening refrain happened like many things in the music business; by accident. Chicago-born and bred vocalist Eugene Dixon A/K/A Gene Chandler and his mates Earl Edwards, Ben Broyles, and James Lowe (the Dukays) were rehearsing their single "Nite Owl," which had been previously released on Nat to a less than thunderous response. They used "duke-duke-duke" as a warm-up riff. Promoter Carl Davis heard them, quickly had songwriter Bernice Williams huddle with the crew and devise some lyrics, and Vee-Jay soon had its biggest hit ever, at least generated within the label's ranks. Chandler's creamy tenor, sublime harmonizing, and that unforgettable "duke-duke-duke" tag landed a #1 pop and R&B hit.

Dee Clark - "Raindrops"

You could write a dissertation (I'm sure someone already has) about the significance of rain as a lyric metaphor in popular music (and literature). But on a less lofty level, the thunderclap and rain falling in the background was an inspired production sweetener, coupled with wonderful guitar by Phil Upchurch. The onetime Delecta "Dee" Clark had previously been known for great imitations of classic R&B singers and also being a fine novelty artist. But he demolished that book with "Raindrops," turning in a soaring, definitive and awesome performance in which he moved from triumph to heartache in 2:13. Clark made other records that were good, and a couple that were very good, but he never duplicated the fire and hurt that oozed from his voice as "Raindrops" concluded.

The Dells - "Stay In My Corner"

Hardcore doo-wop/R&B types used to wage verbal warfare with soul lovers over whether The Dells' '60s sides on Checker were superior to their '50s cuts on Vee-Jay. Personally, that strikes me as one of those 'apples vs. oranges' questions; however, the (R&B) survey says their soul version far outsold the original. Irregardless, you hear the beginnings of what became their

trademark: Marvin Jr.'s lumbering, yet cutting baritone framed against former Flamingo Johnny Carter's angelic, youthful-sounding falsetto. The group had endured only its second lineup change in its 40-plus year history in 1960, when Johnny Funches departed and was replaced by Carter, who joined founding members Junior, Verne Allison, Mickey McGill and Chuck Barksdale (McGill's brother Lucius had left early in the game, when he found out show business was a lot more business than show). The song includes an excellent extended harmony section near the end, but relies on the tension between Junior's booming voice, almost demanding faithfulness, and Carter's tender one begging for it.

This version did reach #23 on the R&B charts, though it fizzled pop-wise. It would be three years later when Charles Stepney extended the harmony section, lengthened the song, and put even more emphasis on Junior's vigorous lead. That one became a #1 R&B hit and Top 10 pop single. But it doesn't quite match the zeal of the original.

The Dells - "Oh What A Nite"

The group landed its only big Vee-Jay hit with this '56 original, though it too later enjoyed even greater success in a reincarnated soul version. But Johnny Funches had his day in the sun, with a lead that avoided gloating, while remembering the joys of an unforgettable encounter. Marvin Junior was in a subordinate role this time, but still had some impact as the contrast to Funches. The Dells managed to sound romantic, vulnerable, and triumphant within the same number, and the unison passages and harmonizing were incendiary.

Amazingly enough, the remake of "Oh What A Nite" (retitled) "Oh What A Night" duplicated almost exactly the track record of "Stay In My Corner." It topped the R&B charts in 1969 and peaked at #10 pop. The only difference was that it stayed on top only one week, while "Stay In My Corner" reigned for three.

Jerry Butler and The Impressions - "For Your Precious Love"

He had such a velvet-smooth sound and suave, sophisticated air that Jerry Butler was nicknamed "The Ice Man," but there was some heat underneath that cool. Though he sang with a mellow ease, Jerry Butler could light the romantic flame in a lyric just like a Billy Eckstine, Johnny Mathis or any other skilled jazz or pop crooner. Butler had moved to Chicago from Mississippi in the late '50s, and sang gospel with longtime pal Curtis Mayfield, as well as doubling in area doo-wop groups. Butler, Mayfield, Sam Gooden, Richard and Arthur Brooks eventually joined Vee-Jay and had their names changed from The Roosters to Jerry Butler & The Impressions. "For Your Precious Love" combined Butler's swaying, just-right lead with Mayfield's flickering guitar and the lyric insights of Butler and Arthur Brooks. It was an instant smash, and remains an R&B and popular music anthem. For those who use such things as a measurement of success, the song peaked at #3 R&B and #11 pop in 1958, but would have been a classic had it never been heard outside Chicago.

Jerry Butler moved on to great success as a solo singer, though he maintained his friendship with Mayfield. He's currently a Cook County Commissioner and still occasional performer.

Jerry Butler - "He Will Break Your Heart"

The lyrics "He don't love you/like I love you" are so enshrined in the R&B fan's head many people think that's the name of the song. Well, it's actually called "He Will Break Your Heart," and there's no way any number with a refrain that great could fail. But it also incorporates other clever word maneuvers as "Fare thee well" and "he uses all the great quotations." Still, don't give the entire credit to the songwriting tandem of Butler, Curtis Mayfield and Calvin Carter; Butler's shimmering lead, Mayfield's evocative falsetto harmonies and teasing guitar, plus a great arrangement, all have something to do with it, too. Incidentally, of all the covers that have been done of this tune, one of the best was turned in by The Righteous Brothers as an album cut on their Verve LP "Soul And Inspiration."

El Dorados - "At My Front Door"

Like many of their doo-wop comrades, the El Dorados scored one huge hit, then became a footnote despite cutting other worthy records. There were so many groups making so many records that inevitably their shelf life was brief. Pirkle Lee Moses was usually a fine vocalist, but on "At My Front Door" he became a great one. His supremely self-confident (bordering on arrogant) reading of the storyline and the group's wonderful supporting harmonies, plus a roaring arrangement, made this a 'jump' classic. There was no false modesty here, nor any teasing or implied qualities, simply upfront admonitions to any and all concerned about what would happen if they didn't keep a close eye on their women.

John Lee Hooker - "Boom Boom"

Add John Lee Hooker's name to that list of performers delighting in stylistic repetition. Hooker has been doing boogie updates since 1949, when he told the world, "You've got to let that boy boogie," and made "Boogie Chillen" a standard. "Boom Boom" was only marginally different from "Crawling King Snake Blues," or "I'm In The Mood," or any of dozens of other Hooker tunes; the Hook was awesome. Hooker's voice shuddered, shook, hollered and roared, and the chugging arrangement made you dance, shout, and jump all at once. Many years later Eric Burdon and the Animals would do a version that, for my money, was a lot better song than several others they did that went much further up the charts. The original peaked at #16 on the R&B hit list; not bad, but hardly Hooker's biggest hit. Doesn't matter though, hoss; Hooker's had plenty more since.

Jimmy Reed - "Bright Lights, Big City"

Jimmy Reed's greatness, even in the face of almost unbelievably bad habits (legendary alcoholism and irresponsibility) cannot be challenged. The loping, slurring vocals, biting, pithy harmonica and equally memorable guitar work, sparkled on every song. He, along with Elmore James, Slim Harpo, and a handful of others, demolished the proposition that thematic sameness prevents

consistent success; Reed HAD to make all his songs alike; he did well to even make them, period. This one has the familiar characteristics, from his often impossible-to-ascertain vocals to the pungent supporting licks and the angular beat. It's a gem, and you can only speculate what Reed might have done had he taken even minimal care of himself.

Little Richard - "I Don't Know What You Got"

He was famous then, and still is today, for being absolutely paranoid about being upstaged; so it's no accident that Jimi Hendrix's time with Little Richard was neither long nor always an enjoyable situation. But for this one number, ego questions got pushed to the rear. Richard later helped get songwriter Don Covay's performance career off the ground; here, Covay gave Richard a fantastic song that had everything: irony, counterpoint, conflicting emotions, and vivid lyrics and music. Richard showed that he could be as soulful and gripping a storyteller as he was whooping and hollering, and Hendrix revealed the blues inflections and licks that he later embellished and highlighted with other antics, like burning his guitar and cranking up his amplifier. This is one of the rare Vee-Jay tracks longer than three minutes, but they could have gone on for 20.

The Spaniels - "Goodnight Sweetheart, Goodnight"

Because resident doo-wop fakes Sha Na Na used this as their close for years, the uninformed might dismiss it as lightweight fodder. But the original shreds that canard; Gerald Gregory's resounding bass intro will quickly render the Sha Na Na rip-off a memory, while the underrated Pookie Hudson's lead conveyed longing, anguish, ardor and anxiety, and the other Spaniels chimed in with ideal support. The group had taken its name from a disparaging comment they'd received from Gregory's wife during a practice session, that they "sounded like a bunch of dogs." On this occasion, they were close to sounding like a pack of angels. They even attained a rare pop hit, reaching #25 at a time when R&B was R&B, pop was pop, and seldom did the two mix.

A sad footnote to this occasion was the story later detailed by Hudson that the legendary disc jockey Alan Freed wanted half the song writers' share for the tune; and when he didn't get it, instituted an embargo on the group from his shows. Whether that's true or not is undetermined; but it's sad that Freed, who was himself later the victim of shameless treatment, would engage in such behavior.

About Ron Wynn

Ron Wynn has had a lifelong love affair with Rhythm & Blues (as well as blues, jazz, gospel and country). He's the editor of the newly published "All-Music Guide™ To Jazz," a contributing editor to the "All-Music Guide™," and a contributing writer on R&B to "CD Review." He's also the author of "The Tina Turner Story," and was a contributing writer to the first "Rock and Roll Confidential" book. Wynn was a former chief music critic at "The Memphis Commercial Appeal" and "Bridgeport Post-Telegram" newspapers, and has had articles published in several publications. He's currently an associate editor of the "All-Music Guide™" in charge of jazz/African-American popular music.

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"Duke Of Earl" performed by Gene Chandler; "Raindrops" performed by Dee Clark; "Stay In My Corner" and "Oh What A Nite" performed by The Dells; "For Your Precious Love" performed by Jerry Butler and The Impressions; "He Will Break Your Heart", A/K/A "He Don't Love You (Like I Love You)" performed by Jerry Butler; "At My Front Door" performed by the El Dorados; "Boom Boom" performed by John Lee Hooker; "Bright Lights, Big City" performed by Jimmy Reed; "I Don't Know What You Got" performed by Little Richard; "Goodnight Sweetheart, Goodnight A/K/A Goodnight, It's Time To Go" performed by The Spaniels. Courtesy of Vee-Jay Limited Partnership.

Title

Duke Of Earl
 Raindrops
 Stay In My Corner
 Oh What A Nite
 For Your Precious Love
 He Will Break Your Heart

Writer

E. Edwards, B. Williams, E. Dixon
 D. Clark
 W. Flemons, B. Miller, B. Strong
 M. Junior, J. Funches
 A. Brooks, R. Brooks, J. Butler
 C. Mayfield, J. Butler, C. Carter

At My Front Door
 Boom Boom
 Bright Lights, Big City

J. Moore, E. Abner
 J. L. Hooker
 J. Reed, M. Reed

I Don't Know What You Got
 Goodnight Sweetheart, Goodnight

Penniman
 C. Carter, J. Hudson

Publisher

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- 3) DEE CLARK - Raindrops
- 4) THE DELLS - Stay In My Corner
- 5) THE DELLS - Oh What A Nite
- 6) THE IMPRESSIONS - For Your Precious Love
- 7) JERRY BUTLER - He Will Break Your Heart
- 8) EL DORADOS - At My Front Door
- 9) JOHN LEE HOOKER - Boom Boom
- 10) JIMMY REED - Bright Lights, Big City
- 11) LITTLE RICHARD - I Don't Know What You Got
- 12) THE SPANIELS - Goodnight Sweetheart, Goodnight

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